

The workings of the single member plurality electoral system in India and the need for reform

Article (Accepted Version)

Diwakar, Rekha (2018) The workings of the single member plurality electoral system in India and the need for reform. Asian Journal of Comparative Politics. pp. 1-21. ISSN 2057-8911

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Introduction

India uses single member plurality system (SMPS) to elect the members of the lower house of its national parliament and the state assemblies. Under SMPS, elections are conducted for separate geographical areas, known as constituencies or districts, and the electors cast one vote each for a candidate with the winner being the candidate who gets the plurality of votes.¹ SMPS is traditionally defended primarily on the grounds of simplicity and its tendency to produce winning candidates, which promotes a link between constituents and their representatives. It tends to provide a clear-cut choice for voters between two main parties, and is expected to give rise to single-party rather than coalition governments. It also has the benefit of excluding extremist parties from gaining representation, unless their support is geographically concentrated.

However, SMPS has been criticised because it can lead to a substantial disproportionality between the share of the votes cast for each party and its share of seats. According to Lijphart (1994), majoritarian electoral systems such as SMPS make it difficult for small parties to gain representation because they need to win majorities or pluralities of the vote in electoral districts; and tend to systematically favour the larger parties, produce disproportional election outcomes, and discourage multipartism. Shugart (2008:8) points out that 'Despite its long historical pedigree and its continuing widespread use, it is a system that academic specialists in electoral systems rate as one of the least desirable systems (Bowler and Farrell, 2006), and it also does not fare well in competition with other electoral systems when

¹ SMPS is also known as First-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system.

new democracies are choosing their method of electing representatives.’ SMPS can also exclude minorities from fair representation, and encourage the development of parties based on clan, ethnicity or region. Further, it leaves a large number of wasted votes, which do not count towards the election of the winning candidate in a constituency.

SMPS was adopted, and has remained stable, in India since the country held its first democratic election in 1952. SMPS usually works best when the two largest parties share most of the votes across different regions of a country. However, since 1989, Indian party system has fragmented, and in the seven national elections held during the period 1989 to 2009, SMPS failed to produce a single party majority government at the centre, leading to a phase of large, and in most part, unstable coalition governments. Although the most recent national election held in 2014 produced a majority for one party – the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), it does not mark a clear reversal of coalition politics or governments in India (Diwakar, 2014:124). The efficacy of the SMPS in India has not been seriously or sufficiently debated either in academic studies or in a policy context. Most prominent comparative studies on electoral system reform also exclude India from their analysis (for example Blais, 2008).

This paper seeks to address the question about the suitability of SMPS during an era of party fragmentation and coalition politics in India. Drawing on a comprehensive data set covering all sixteen national elections held during 1952-2014, and some recent state elections held during 2015-2017, it evaluates how SMPS has performed

against its stated benefits. Based on this evaluation, the paper discusses whether there is a case for electoral system reform, and highlights the reasons for the continuance of SMPS in India despite its many shortcomings.

Choosing an electoral system

By converting votes cast by the electorate into seats, an electoral system effectively determines which candidates are elected, and which party gains power. As Idea (2005:1) points out, the electoral system 'has a profound effect on the future political life of the country concerned, and electoral systems, once chosen, often remain fairly constant as political interests solidify around and respond to the incentives presented by them.' According to Lijphart (1994:57), the two main political consequences of electoral systems include their effects on the proportionality (between share of votes and seats) or disproportionality of the electoral outcomes, and their effects on the party system, particularly the degree of multipartism and the tendency to generate majority victories.

The main objective of the electoral system is to provide representation to the electorate. The electoral system should also facilitate formation of a stable government, which is able to enact legislation efficiently, and enable voters to hold the government accountable either by altering the coalition of parties in power or by throwing out of office a single-party, which has failed to deliver (Idea, 2015: 12). The nature and the size of party system, as well as the internal cohesion and discipline of parties are also influenced by the type of electoral system chosen. If an electoral

system is not considered fair, and provides limited opportunities for the opposition to win, it can lead to political unrest, and even extremism, where parties or social groups decide to work outside the system, using non-democratic means.

Designing an electoral system involves making a choice between two main trade-offs: between the representativeness of the legislature and government accountability; and the accountability of individual politicians and party cohesion (Hix et al, 2010). One view is that elections should produce a representative parliament, where party vote-share translates directly into party seat-shares. According to this view, elections are best held under some form of proportional representation (PR). On the other hand, there is a contrasting view that favours electoral systems such as the SMPS that deliver accountable single-party government and facilitate giving a majority to whichever party comes first in seats. It is difficult to achieve both these objectives through a single electoral system. Similarly, it is difficult for the electoral system to produce both accountable politicians as well as cohesive parties, which are able to deliver on their electoral promises.

Shugart (2008:54) states that a paradox of reform in parliamentary SMPS is that it must be initiated by the very party that was advantaged by the existing system — the party with the most seats in parliament. And therefore, the likelihood of electoral system reform being implemented is relatively low. Hix et al (2010) remind us that there is no such thing as a perfect electoral system, since features, which are virtues to some observers could be viewed as defects by others. Choosing an electoral system is ultimately a political decision, and the consideration of electoral benefits is always an important, if not the only factor in the choice of electoral systems.

Why did India choose SMPS?

India's parliamentary form of government and SMPS are a legacy of British colonialism, which ended with India's independence in 1947. The British introduced self-government to India in stages, and it was not until the end of colonial rule in 1947, and adoption of the Indian Constitution in 1949 by a Constituent Assembly that universal suffrage was achieved.^{2 3} India's choice of electoral system was influenced by the twin pressure of continuing with the SMPS with which it had some experience during the British rule, as well as the pressure towards PR to ensure adequate representation of its highly heterogeneous population. For a new country that was experimenting with democracy despite high levels of illiteracy, three themes of SMPS – simplicity, stability and constituency representation (Farrell, 2001:20) were instrumental in the decision to adopt this electoral system.⁴ In the first two national elections ie 1952 and 1957, there were also about 90 (of 400) multimember districts but these were abolished thereafter. After this change, the electoral system for *Lok Sabha* has remained unchanged.

According to Austin (1966:144), the Constituent Assembly had one predominant aim when framing the Indian Constitution ie to create a basis for the social and political unity of the country, and it chose to do so by having universal adult suffrage, and

² The Constitution of India came into force on 26 January 1950.

³ Under the Indian Constitution, at the central government level, voters elect a 543-member *Lok Sabha*, or the lower house, the principal legislative body from single-member districts using a plurality vote. The upper house of the Parliament, the *Rajya Sabha* or Council of States is indirectly elected by members of the state legislative assemblies in accordance with proportional representation system by means of a single transferable vote (STV). Members of the state legislative assemblies are also elected using SMPS.

⁴ India also introduced a system of electoral reservation for socially disadvantaged groups - the scheduled castes (SCs) and scheduled tribes (STs), a system that continues till today.

providing for the direct representation of the voters in popular assemblies.⁵ It favoured the idea of a 'loyal opposition' and two strong parties to ensure the traditional working of parliamentary democracy and a cabinet government (Austin, 1966:146). Although several members of the Constituent Assembly argued for PR, this proposal was never taken very seriously, and in India, where the number of competing interest groups was large, the Constituent Assembly felt that it made more sense to follow the British (SMPS) model (Guha, 2002:108).

An important point to note that an explicit debate on the merits of alternative electoral systems did not take place in the Constituent Assembly. Further, whatever limited debate that took place did not reveal a deep understanding of the dynamics of either the SMPS or of various PR formulae. Instead, there was almost a natural affinity towards the familiar SMPS (Sridharan, 2005:355).

How has SMPS performed in India?

In this section, I use data from sixteen parliamentary and few recent state assembly elections held during 1952-2017 in India to examine how SMPS has performed against its potential benefits. In particular, I study whether and to what extent SMPS has led to two party competition at the district level in the past, and its past and likely future success in producing stable single-party governments at the national level.

⁵ Popular assemblies refer to *Lok Sabha* at the centre and *Vidhan Sabha* in the states.

District level trends

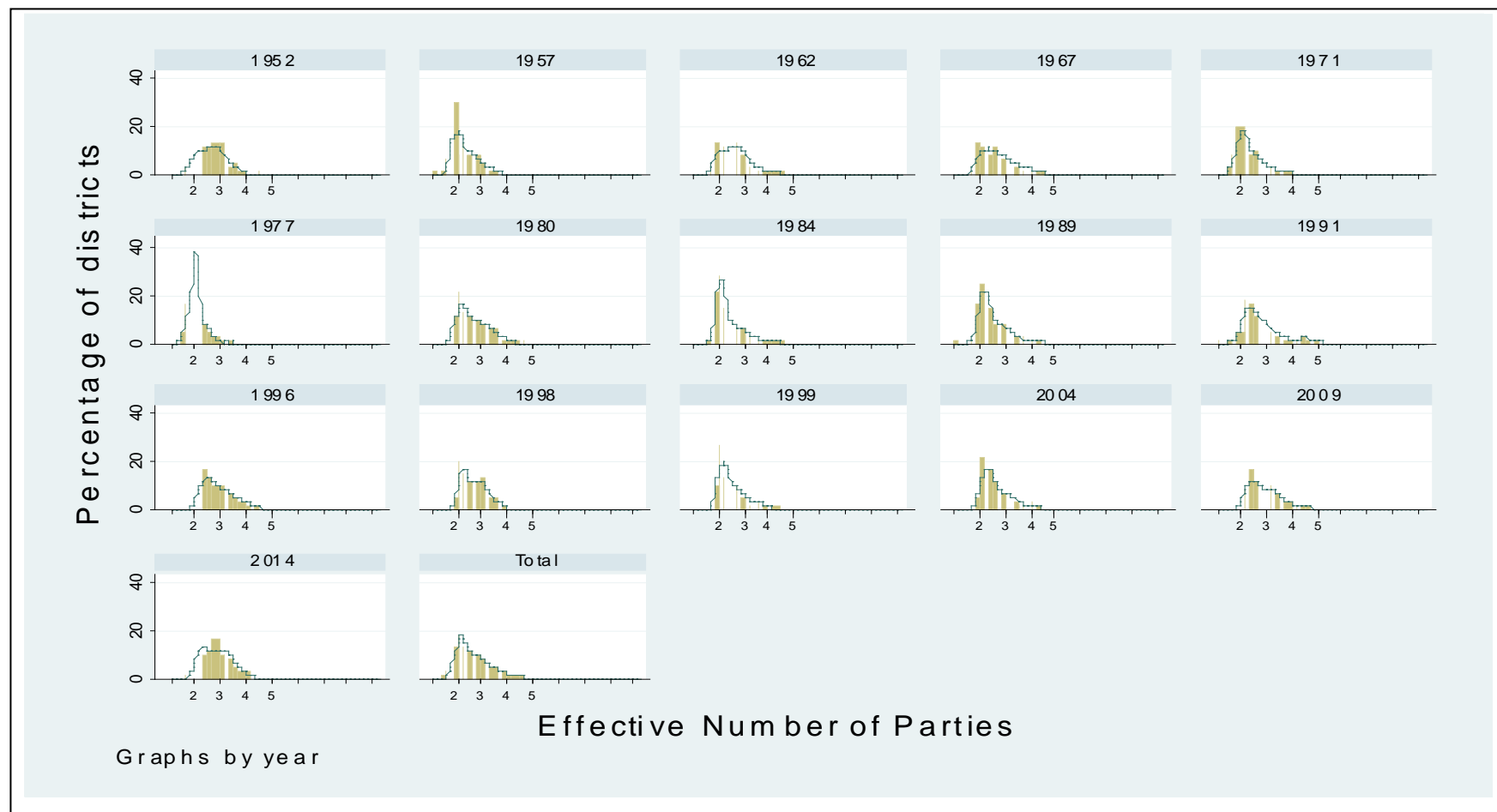
In what became known as ‘Duverger’s Law’, Duverger (1959) stated that the simple majority electoral system favours the two party system. Two principal reasons for this phenomenon relate to the mechanical and the psychological effects. According to the mechanical effect, plurality systems tend to have a constraining effect on the number of parties, while proportional systems tend to be more ‘permissive’ resulting in a greater diversity of parties. The psychological impact of electoral systems reinforces this mechanical effect: under SMPS, many voters may not express their sincere choice but rather vote strategically for another candidate who they believe has a realistic chance of winning the seat.

However, contrary to expectation, SMPS has not unequivocally produced a two party system in India at the district level, and a non-trivial proportion of votes have been cast in favour of smaller parties, which do not make a difference to the election outcome, and are therefore wasted. Figure 1 shows how ‘Effective number of parties’ (ENP) by votes, a key measure of party fragmentation, at the district level has evolved over 16 national elections in India.⁶ It shows that in general, the distribution of ENP has shifted towards right especially after 1989, showing the increasing fragmentation of the Indian party system. This is further evidenced by Table 1, which shows that in the latest election in 2014, 95% of the districts had ENP greater than 2, and 63% of districts had ENP >2.5. Since 1989, there has been a clear departure from predictions of Duverger’s law in most of the Indian districts, with 95% of districts having >2 ENP and 32% districts having 3 ENP, thus signalling the inability of the

⁶ ENP = $1/[\sum p_i^2]$, where p represents vote or seat share of the ith party (Laakso and Taagepera, 1979).

electoral system to stop more parties contesting elections and winning significant percentage of votes, many of which are wasted. There must be reasons other than pure rational choice (which predicts that voters act strategically and do not tend to waste their votes), for example seeking better representation, which could explain voters' support for parties that are unlikely to win an electoral contest.

Figure 1 Evolution of the distribution of ENP by votes at district level in Indian national elections



Note: The Y axis measures kernel density, which is a non-parametric way to estimate the probability density function of a random variable.

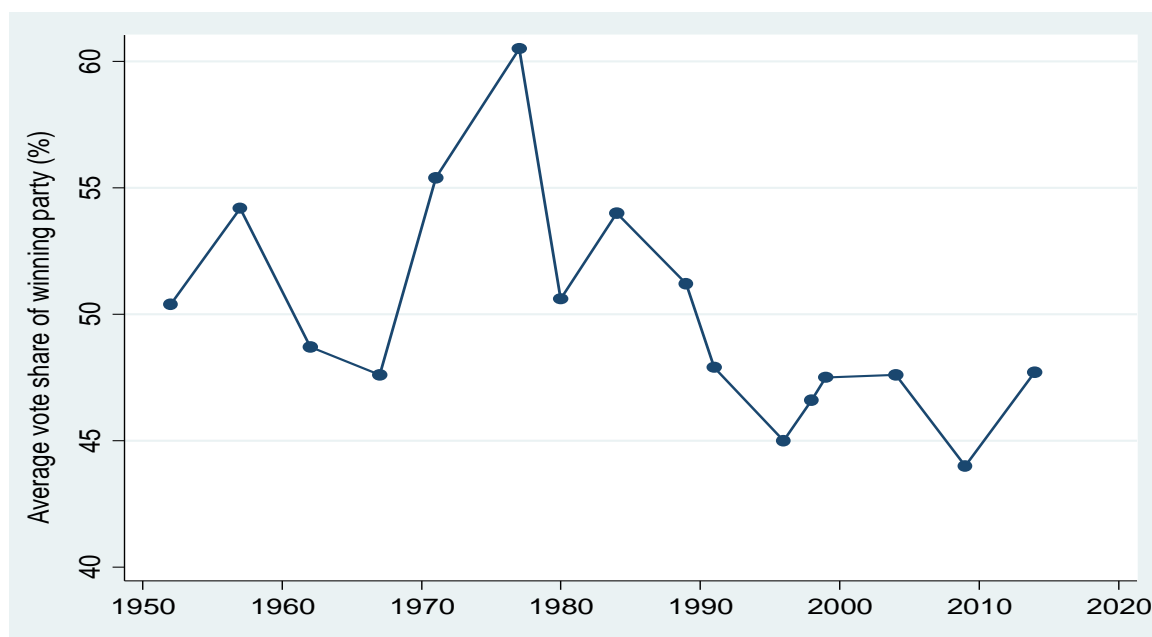
Table 1 **ENP by votes at district level in the Indian national elections**

Year	Less than or equal to 2 (%)	2 – 2.5 (%)	2.5 – 3 (%)	> 3 (%)	Mean	Median	Number of districts
1952	19%	22%	30%	29%	2.7	2.7	310
1957	41%	23%	20%	15%	2.4	2.3	312
1962	18%	23%	30%	29%	2.8	2.7	494
1967	15%	24%	25%	36%	2.9	2.7	520
1971	28%	36%	19%	17%	2.4	2.2	518
1977	51%	40%	8%	2%	2.1	2.0	542
1980	9%	40%	23%	28%	2.7	2.6	529
1984	18%	50%	17%	15%	2.4	2.2	542
1989	13%	50%	18%	19%	2.5	2.3	529
1991	7%	37%	25%	31%	2.9	2.6	537
1996	1%	29%	27%	43%	3.0	2.9	543
1998	3%	40%	29%	27%	2.7	2.6	543
1999	6%	48%	22%	24%	2.6	2.4	543
2004	4%	45%	21%	30%	2.8	2.5	543
2009	2%	33%	22%	43%	3.1	2.9	543
2014	5%	32%	27%	36%	2.8	2.8	543
All elections	14%	37%	23%	27%	2.7	2.5	8091
1952-1984	24%	34%	21%	21%	2.5	2.3	3767
1989 - 2014	5%	39%	24%	32%	2.8	2.6	4324

Source: Author's calculations based on Election Commission of India data.

In addition to ENP at district level remaining above 2, the vote share of the winning party has also seen a decline as is shown in Figure 2. The average vote share of the winning party in a district averaged 53% for the elections held during 1952-1989, but it declined to 47% for subsequent elections, implying a relatively large proportion of wasted votes in an election at district level.

Figure 2 Average vote share of winning party in a district



Source: Author's calculations based on Election Commission of India data.

Notes (1): Data is from over 8000 constituency level (national) elections during 1952-2014.

(2): Each point is average for a national election at the district level.

Table 2 shows the frequency distribution of vote share of the winning candidate in constituency elections held during 1952-2014. It shows that during 1952-1984, the winning candidates in over 60% of the districts received 50% or more votes, but thereafter, only 40% of winning candidates managed to secure a majority of votes in a district level contest. Thus, despite SMPS, the trend is of declining support for the winning party in a district.

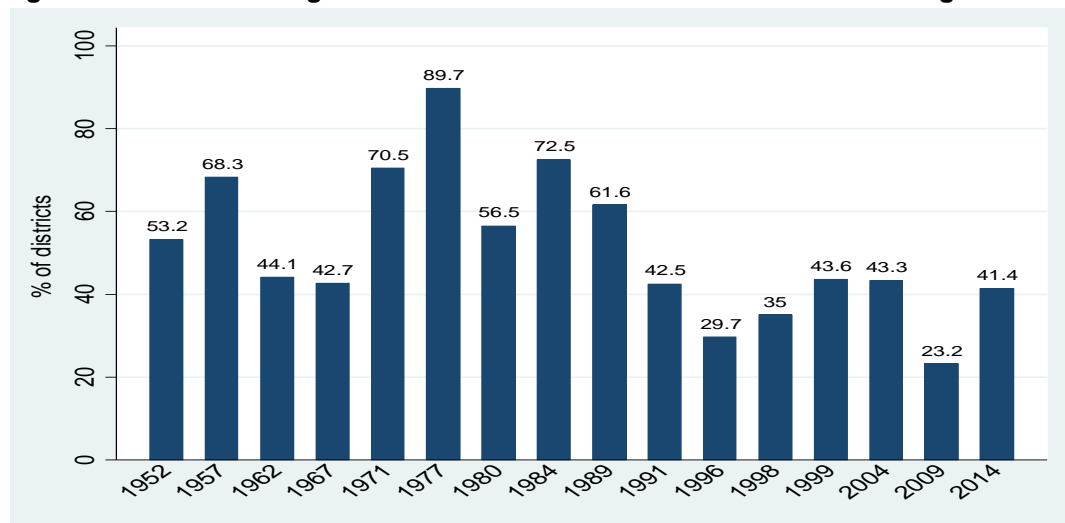
Table 2 **Distribution of vote share of winning candidate in a district**

	1952-1984		1989-2014		1952-2014	
Vote share of winning party	Number of districts	% of districts	Number of districts	% of districts	Number of districts	% of districts
<20%	2	0.1%	1	0.0%	3	0.0%
20-30%	48	1.3%	96	2.2%	144	1.8%
30-40%	376	10.0%	769	17.8%	1145	14.2%
40-50%	978	26.0%	1730	40.0%	2708	33.5%
>50%	2363	62.7%	1728	40.0%	4091	50.6%
Total	3767	100.0%	4324	100.0%	8091	100.0%

Source: Author's calculations based on Election Commission of India data.

The same point is also made by observing the trends of the proportion of districts with vote share greater than 50% in each national election, which is shown in Figure 3. After 1991, only around 30-40% of total districts in India saw winning candidate getting a majority of votes, which calls into question whether the constituency link and representation of constituents is being effectively served under SMPS in India.

Figure 3 **Percentage of districts with vote share > 50% of the winning candidate**



Source: Author's calculations based on Election Commission of India data.

Thus, the SMPS has not unequivocally led to a two party system in India at the district level, and the threshold to win the election has also seen a decline. Low thresholds often lead to multiparty competition, and compound the problems of wasted votes usually seen under SMPS. For example, it has been shown by Chhibber and Nooruddin (2004) that Indian states witnessing multiparty competition are more likely to involve 'vote bank' politics in favour of specific electoral constituencies rather than provide public goods that benefits the broader population. Further, while allocating public goods and services, governments are more likely to favour areas that either return MPs from their party or could do after the next election.

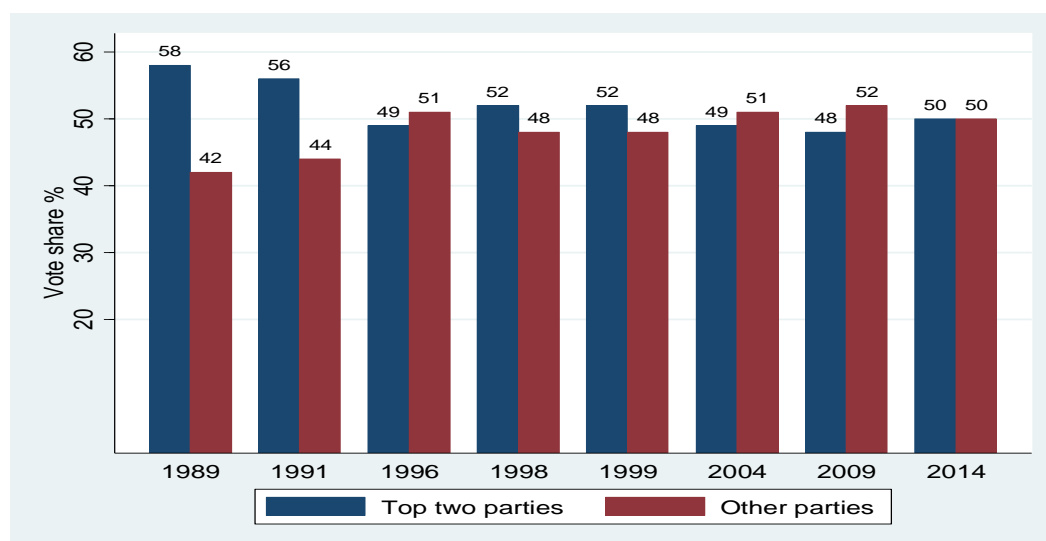
Various explanations have been put forward regarding SMPS not unequivocally delivering the expected two-party system at the constituency level in India. These include Cox's (1994) non-Duvergerian equilibrium where the first and second placed losers tie in a constituency (Chhibber and Kollman, 2004:38). Other studies (Diwakar, 2007) have however questioned the usefulness of Cox's SF ratio (vote share of second loser to that of the first loser) in explaining deviations from Duverger's law in the Indian situation. It has also been argued that a relatively high level of social heterogeneity is the main reason for competition between many parties in the Indian constituencies. As Mayer (2013:191,199) argues 'the Indian experience forces us to recognise the profound impact that social divisions and social change have on political competition and on the number of parties and candidates who contest elections....social forces appear to be so powerful that they must lead us to question whether the mechanical

and psychological forces which are at the heart of the [Duverger's] law are really decisive at all.'

National level trends

At the national level, SMPS is expected to deliver a two party system, where one party gets a majority in the parliament, and the other acts as a significant and effective opposition. Secondly, it is expected that the party with highest number of votes should get highest number of seats. However, in India, the level of the top two parties' vote share at the national level has only been around 50 per cent in the recent elections (see Figure 4). The balance 50 per cent of vote share is shared mainly by state or regional parties that have concentrated support base in their respective states or regions.

Figure 4 National vote share (%) of top two versus that of other parties



Source: Election Commission of India data.

The growing importance of the state and regional parties has been at the cost of the two main national parties – the Congress and the BJP.⁷ Table 3 shows that the percentage of districts where these two parties were the top two parties by vote share averaged only about 31% during 1989 – 2014.⁸ In the remaining 69% of districts, the competition was either between one of the national parties and a regional party, or between two regional parties or state parties. This shows that the top two parties are not likely to win enough votes and seats to command an overall majority in the national parliament. This has necessitated these parties entering into electoral alliances with state or regional parties to improve their chances of forming governments at the centre.

Table 3 Districts where top two parties (by votes) are the Congress and the BJP

Election	1989	1991	1996	1998	1999	2004	2009	2014	Average 1989-2014
Percentage of districts where Congress and BJP were top two parties by vote share	19.7	29.6	26.2	31.8	36.8	34.1	31.8	34.8	30.6

Source: Author's calculations based on Election Commission of India data.

As can be seen in Table 4, until 1984, the top two parties (by seats) routinely secured 70-75% of seats in the parliament.⁹ However, in the eight elections after 1989, parties other than the top two have routinely won over 200 seats (average of 221 or 41% of the

⁷ Congress was established in 1885, and led the freedom struggle against the colonial British role. It remained the dominant political party for two decades after India's independence, but its dominance declined thereafter. BJP was formed in 1980 and is a Hindu nationalist party. After achieving a clear majority in the 2014 national election, it is now seen the principal national party in India.

⁸ 1989 marked the beginning of fragmentation of the Indian party system.

⁹ Until 1984 (except in 1977), substantial share of the seats won by the top two parties went to the Congress.

total seats) in the *Lok Sabha*, and this has important implications for the size and competitiveness of the party system at the national level.

Table 4 **Seats won in *Lok Sabha***

Election	Largest party (by seats)		Runner up party (by seats)		Other Parties	
	Seats	%	Seats	Seats	Seats	%
1952	364	74%	16	3%	109	22%
1957	371	75%	27	5%	96	19%
1962	361	73%	29	6%	104	21%
1967	283	54%	44	8%	193	37%
1971	352	68%	25	5%	141	27%
1977	295	54%	154	28%	93	17%
1980	353	67%	41	8%	135	26%
1984	404	79%	30	6%	80	16%
1989	197	37%	143	27%	189	36%
1991	232	45%	120	23%	169	32%
1996	161	30%	140	26%	242	45%
1998	182	34%	141	26%	220	41%
1999	182	34%	114	21%	247	45%
2004	145	27%	138	25%	260	48%
2009	206	38%	116	21%	221	41%
2014	282	52%	44	8%	217	40%
Average '1952-1984	348	68%	46	9%	119	23%
Average 1989 - 2014	198	37%	120	22%	221	41%
Average 1952 - 2014	273	52%	83	15%	170	32%

Source: Author's calculations based on Election Commission of India data.

The fragmentation of the Indian party system is also reflected in the increase in the number of parties that have been able to win seats in *Lok Sabha*. Table 5 shows that before the 1989 election, on an average, there were 12 parties with less than 5 seats represented in *Lok Sabha*, but this number increased to 20 in elections held during 1989-2014. Similarly, while there were on an average, 19 parties that were represented in *Lok Sabha* in elections held between 1989 and 1984, this number increased to 33 in the subsequent elections. This matters since 'the greater the number of parties in the legislature, and the higher the presence of extreme ideological parties, the greater the difficulty of forming durable coalition' (Ruparelia, 2015:24).

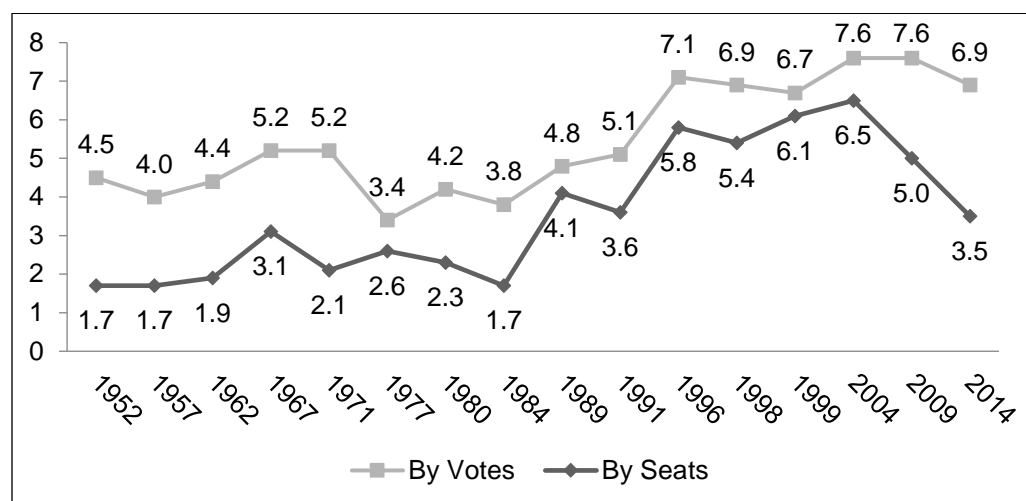
Table 5 **Number of parties represented in *Lok Sabha***

Year	Parties with < 5 seats	Number of seat winning parties
1952	16	23
1957	8	12
1962	13	20
1967	10	19
1971	16	24
1977	11	19
1980	10	17
1984	11	17
1989	17	24
1991	15	24
1996	13	28
1998	22	39
1999	22	38
2004	21	38
2009	25	37
2014	22	38
1952-1984 average	12	19
1989 - 2014 average	20	33

Source: Author's calculations based on Election Commission of India data.

The fragmentation of the party system at the national level can also be seen in the trends of ENP by votes and seats. Figure 5 shows that even before the fragmentation of the party system in 1989, ENP (by votes) remained between 4 and 5 for most elections, while ENP by seats averaged around 2 largely because of the domination of the Congress in the first two decades after India's independence. However, after 1989, ENP (by votes) has averaged above 6, and even ENP by seats has averaged around 5. The 2014 election was an exceptional one, which saw a rare majority for a single party leading to a decline in ENP by seats to 3.5. However, as MacDonald and Moussavi (2015a: 18) point out 'The BJP's landslide victory [in 2014] was in fact due to the idiosyncrasies of India's first-past-the-post electoral system. While not unique in the country's history, the scale of the BJP's seat bonus in 2014 returns India to "minoritarian as opposed to majoritarian democracy, in which democratic outcomes are perverted by disproportionately empowering the ruling party.'

Figure 5 Effective number of parties (by votes and seats) at the national level



Source: Author's calculations based on Election Commission of India data.

According to Shugart (2008), two types of anomalous outcomes in SMPS are (i) the 'plurality reversal' when the party with the most seats is different from the party with the most votes and (ii) the 'lopsided majority' when the opposition is decimated. Another outcome, which can be considered anomalous in SMPS, is the formation of a coalition government. If any of these electoral outcomes occur at a regular interval, SMPS cannot be said to be producing expected results. Table 6 highlights these anomalous outcomes in Indian national elections. In 3 elections - 1996, 1998 and 1999, Congress received highest share of shares but was second to BJP in respect of number of seats. The opposition was decimated in 8 out of 16 elections (in 1952, 1957, 1962, 1967, 1971, 1980, 1984 and 2014), receiving an average of just 8% seat share, while the winning party won on an average 68% of the seats. Finally, since 1989, the elections have produced a series of coalition governments in the centre (in 6 of the last 8 elections), the vast majority of these being minority governing coalitions of the kind rarely seen in western democracies using SMPS. Ruparelia (2015:327) argues that

although hung parliaments, minority governments and power-sharing executives arise in other plurality-rule regimes, yet they rarely become the norm.

According to Sridharan (2014:55), under plurality-rule, unlike in PR, a small vote swing can hugely increase or decimate a party. And this tends to encourage minority coalitions because greater electoral volatility creates the possibility for an opposition party coming into power in the next election either on its own or in a coalition. Similarly, Ruparelia (2015:27) has argued that 'The demise of single-party majority governments [in India] at the Centre since 1989 owes much to the complex interaction effects of plurality-rule elections in a progressively regionalized federal parliamentary democracy.' Sridharan (2014:56-7) notes that three India-specific features incentivise the formation of either a minority government and/or large and ideologically indiscriminate coalitions. First, in the event of a hung parliament, the government does not need to demonstrate a majority but only needs to prove that the majority does not oppose them. Second, both national and regional parties have strong incentives to form pre-electoral coalitions, ignoring lesser ideological differences, facilitating the formation of large and ideologically diverse coalitions. Lastly, there is a 'lock-in' effect arising out of mutual inter-dependencies amongst parties in national and state elections.

Although the most recent 2014 election saw a single party majority, it also resulted in another SMPS anomaly in respect of decimation of the opposition. In summary, judged

on various criteria, Indian elections have regularly produced results at the national level, which are not expected in SMPS.

Table 6 'Anomalous' results and the evolution of party system at national level¹⁰

Election	Seat Share			Vote Share			Government formed by
	Largest party	Runner-up party	Top two parties	Largest party	Runner-up party	Top two parties	
1952	0.74 Congress	0.03 CPI^b	0.77	0.45 Congress	0.11 SP	0.56	Congress
1957	0.75 Congress	0.05 CPI^b	0.80	0.48 Congress	0.10 PSP	0.58	Congress
1962	0.73 Congress	0.06 CPI^b	0.79	0.45 Congress	0.10 CPI	0.55	Congress
1967	0.54 Congress	0.08 SWA^b	0.62	0.41 Congress	0.09 SWA	0.50	Congress
1971	0.68 Congress	0.05 CPM^b	0.73	0.44 Congress	0.07 BJS	0.51	Congress
1977	0.54 BLD	0.28 Congress	0.82	0.41 BLD	0.35 Congress	0.76	Janata Party (opposition coalition)
1980	0.67 Congress	0.08 JNP (S)^b	0.75	0.43 Congress	0.19 JNP	0.62	Congress
1984	0.79 Congress	0.06 TDP^b	0.85	0.49 Congress	0.07 JNP	0.56	Congress
1989	0.37 Congress	0.27 JD	0.64	0.40 Congress	0.18 JD	0.58	National Front coalition^c
1991	0.45 Congress	0.23 BJP	0.68	0.36 Congress	0.20 BJP	0.56	Congress (Minority government)
1996	0.30 BJP	0.26 Congress	0.56	0.29 Congress^a	0.20 BJP	0.49	United Front coalition^c
1998	0.34 BJP	0.26 Congress	0.60	0.26 Congress^a	0.26 BJP	0.52	BJP-led coalition^c
1999	0.34 BJP	0.21 Congress	0.55	0.28 Congress^a	0.24 BJP	0.52	BJP-led coalition (NDA)^c
2004	0.27 Congress	0.25 BJP	0.52	0.27 Congress	0.22 BJP	0.49	Congress-led coalition (UPA)^c
2009	0.38 Congress	0.21 BJP	0.59	0.29 Congress	0.19 BJP	0.48	Congress-led coalition (UPA)^c
2014	0.52 BJP	0.08 Congress^b	0.60	0.31 BJP	0.19 Congress	0.50	BJP-led coalition (NDA)
All Elections	0.53	0.15	0.68	0.38	0.17	0.55	
1952-1984 Average	0.68	0.09	0.77	0.45	0.14	0.58	
1989-2014 Average	0.37	0.22	0.59	0.31	0.21	0.52	

Source: Author's calculations based on Election Commission of India data.

Notes: (1) Superscript 'a' refers to situations where party that received highest share of votes but did not receive highest number of seats
(2) Superscript 'b' refers to situations where election has led to decimation of opposition.
(3) Superscript 'c' refers to coalition governments
(4) Although 2014 election led to the formation of a coalition government, it was a coalition of choice, since the BJP on its own achieved a majority.

¹⁰ Description of party names: BLD – Bharatiya Lok Dal, BJP – Bharatiya Janata Party, CPI – Communist Party of India, SWA, CPM – Communist Party of India (Marxist), JP(S) – Janata Party (S), TDP – Telugu Desam Party, JD – Janata Dal, SP – Socialist Party, PSP – Praja Socialist Party, SWA – Swatantra Party, BJS – Bharatiya Jan Sangh, JD – Janata Dal.

SMPS can also produce highly disproportional results, and the recent national and state assembly elections have shown that this is the case in India. In the 2014 national election (see Table 7), Congress got 19.3% of votes but only 44 (of 543) seats, while regional parties ADMK and AITC won 37 and 34 seats respectively with vote share of less than 4%, based on a concentrated support base in the states of Tamil Nadu and West Bengal respectively. Another anomaly was that the BSP, a party that promotes welfare of SCs failed to win any seat despite winning 4.1% of the national vote. BJP, on the other hand won 282 (52%) seats with just 31% of votes. Sridharan (2014:30) has noted, “In a first-past-the-post system, the BJP’s seat majority [achieved in 2014 election] is fragile. It rests on a vote share of just 31 percent, the lowest such share in Indian history to have produced a seat majority.”

Table 7 2014 national election

Party	Vote share %	Number of seats
Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)	31.0	282
Congress	19.3	44
All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (ADMK)	3.3	37
All India Trinamool Congress (AITC)	3.8	34
Biju Janata Dal (BJD)	1.7	20
Shiv Sena (SS)	1.9	18
Telugu Desam Party (TDP)	2.5	16
Aam Aadmi Party (AAP)	2.1	4
Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)	4.1	0
All other	30.3	88
Total	100.0	543

Source: Election Commission of India data.

A highly disproportional result was seen in the 2015 Delhi state assembly election (see Table 8). The *Aam Aadmi* (common man) party (AAP) won 67 out 70 seats (96%) with 54% share of votes, while the BJP only won 3 seats (4%) based on 32.2% of votes.

Table 8 2015 Delhi state election

Party	Vote share %	Number of seats
AAP	54.3	67
BJP	32.2	3
Others	13.5	0
Total	100.0	70

Source: Election Commission of India data.

The 2015 Bihar state assembly election is another example of SMPS producing highly disproportional results in a multi-party contest between two competing party alliances. The BJP received highest vote share of 24.4% but was only the third largest party by seats, after RJD and JD(U), who got much lower share of votes than the BJP.¹¹ More recently, the state assembly election in the largest Indian state – Uttar Pradesh (UP) in 2017 also produced highly disproportional results. As a Parliamentary Standing Committee noted ‘Apprehensions are now being raised that in recent years, the FPTP system is not the best suited system, as is evident from the recent Assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh where results have indicated that a party getting 39% of the vote share [BJP] won 312 seats (77%) and parties getting 22% [Samajwadi Party] and 21% [Bahujan Samaj Party] of the vote share won only 47 and 19 seats, respectively,...’ (Scroll, 2017).

MacDonald and Moussavi (2015a: 20) point out that while disproportionality ‘is not unusual in FPTP systems, the severity of India’s disproportionately undermines the democratic legitimacy of the winning party, whose power is unequal to its support.’ Further, given this disproportionality, and the rise of state and regional parties,

¹¹ The contest was between a Grand alliance of Janata Dal (United) or JD(U) and *Rashtriya Janata Dal* (RJD) plus Congress as a minor partner against the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), which included the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and three smaller parties. This shows that the actual share of votes and seats won by parties can be affected by pre-poll seat sharing arrangements.

coalition governments are likely to be the outcome of future elections, as is further illustrated below.

Table 9 shows (column 2) that before 1989 election, parties other than the top two (by seats) won a relatively small number of seats (averaging 119) in *Lok Sabha*. However, in the subsequent elections, this number has saw a dramatic increase, to an average of 221. Thus, in order to win a majority, a party now needs to have a lead of at least 200 seats over the runner up party – see column 3 of Table 9.¹² However, this level of lead has only happened once (in 2014) in the last eight elections held during the period of 1989-2014, where the average winning margin of the leading party over the runner up party was only 79 seats (see column 4 of Table 9). Overall, the phenomenon of single party achieving a majority seen in 2014 (which requires a lead of over 200 seats over the runner party) is unlikely to repeat in the near future even if a single party manages to emerge as a clear winner. A more likely scenario is the return of coalition governments, which the SMPS was never intended to produce.

¹² Assuming parties other than the top two win 200 seats, the top two parties are left to compete for the balance 343 (543 less 200) seats in the *Lok Sabha*. In order to achieve, the majority, a party will need to win 273 (half of 543 plus 1) seats leaving the runner up party with 73 (343 less 273) seats ie a lead of 200 (273 less 73) seats.

Table 9 Lead required of a top party to get majority in national elections

Election year	Seats won by parties other than the top two	Lead required by top party over runner up party to secure a majority (seats)	Actual lead over runner up party (seats)	Total number of seats
1952	109	111	348	489
1957	96	98	344	494
1962	104	106	332	494
1967	193	195	239	520
1971	141	143	327	518
1977	93	95	141	542
1980	135	137	312	529
1984	80	82	374	514
1989	189	191	54	529
1991	169	171	112	521
1996	242	244	21	543
1998	220	222	41	543
1999	247	249	68	543
2004	260	262	7	543
2009	221	223	90	543
2014	217	219	238	543
Average 1952-1984	119	121	302	
Average 1989 - 2014	221	223	79	
Average 1952 - 2014	170	172	191	

Source: Author's calculations based on Election Commission of India data.

Moreover, the nature of SMPS has meant that small changes in share of the vote often had a dramatic impact upon the number of seats won by a party as Table 10 illustrates for the Congress.

Table 10 Congress' vote and seat share

	Vote share %	Change	Number of Seats	Seats share %	Change
1971	43.7		352	64.8	
1977	34.5	-21.1%	154	28.4	-56.3%
1980	42.7	23.8%	353	65.0	129.2%
1984	48.1	12.6%	405	74.6	14.7%
1989	39.5	-17.9%	197	36.3	-51.4%
1991	36.5	-7.6%	232	44.5	17.8%
1996	28.8	-21.1%	140	25.8	-39.7%
1998	25.8	-10.4%	141	26.0	0.7%
1999	28.3	9.7%	114	21.0	-19.1%
2004	26.7	-5.7%	145	26.7	27.2%
2009	28.6	7.1%	206	37.9	42.1%
2014	19.3	-32.5%	44	8.1	-78.6%

Source: Author's calculations based on Election Commission of India data

SMPS in India can deliver single-party government and a reasonably representative parliament only if the two main national parties command the support of a large proportion of the electorate, and are the top two parties in most constituencies. However, the trends suggest that Indian elections are no longer dominated by the

two main parties in many parts of the country, and they are also unlikely to receive a national share of >30% vote share. Even if a party is able to win a majority of seats on the basis of such a low share of vote, this does not arguably reflect a well-functioning representative democracy.

According to Shugart (2008:21), the existence of local and regional parties make Indian situation qualitatively different from many other countries that follow SMPS. Similarly, Chhibber and Kollman (2004:206) argue that the main reason for fragmentation of the Indian party system after 1989 has resulted from the failure of state parties to coordinate, thus causing low level of party aggregation at the national level. They go on to say that until mid-1980s, the inability to aggregate for Indian parties was due to the failure to aggregate across constituencies as well as across states, but thereafter, this happened due to the failure of state-level parties to coordinate across state-boundaries. Scholars have also put forward the bipolar state-by-state consolidation of non-Congress opposition as an explanation of the fragmentation of the Indian party system at the national level (Sridharan, 2014; Chhibber and Murali, 2006).¹³ As Sridharan (2014:51) argues, 'Duvergerian dynamics can lead to two-party or bipolar state party systems due to the consolidation of the state-level opposition to the principal party in a principal rival, whether a national or regional party, while simultaneously leading to a national multi-party system because the state level two party systems do not consist of the same two parties.' This explanation corresponds with Sartori's (1968:282-83) prediction that although SMPS is a 'strong' electoral system in respect of its ability to shape

¹³ This bipolar consolidation has been one of multiple bipolarities, for example, Congress-BJP, Congress-Left parties, Congress-Regional Party, in different states (Sridharan, 2014:50).

voters and parties' decisions and contain fragmentation, India's ethnic diversity would inhibit the emergence of a two party system.

Thus, the main advantages of SMPS ie it tends to produces stable single-party majority governments, provides an effective constituency level representation, and aggregate votes across the country, are no longer being achieved in the Indian context. Instead, it is likely to produce coalitions, which can be unstable and unrepresentative especially under SMPS.¹⁴ As Sridharan (2005:348) points out, '[under SMPS] power can shift between opposing coalitions quite dramatically, and coalition-making parties have an incentive to try to split the opposing coalition by every means, the payoffs being potentially high. Although coalition governments in India have been criticised for policy incoherence and delays in decision making, it has also been argued that coalitions can have positive economic consequences since they 'reduce the probability that firms consider economic policy uncertainty an obstacle, and increase the probability that firms invest resources in research and development' (Nooruddin, 2010:174). Ruparelia (2015) also highlights that coalition governments in India have paradoxically played a key role in India's governance. This paper's focus is not to evaluate the relative desirability of coalitions versus single party governments in India but suggests that given the failure of SMPS to produce expected outcomes (for example single party majority), there needs to be a serious reconsideration of continuing with this electoral system.

¹⁴ BJP's victory in 2014 national election has been the only exception to this trend since 1989.

Some authors (for example Nooruddin and Chhibber, 2008; Uppal, 2009) point out that India has very high rates of anti-incumbency, which could be considered as an evidence of accountability being enforced via elections (held under SMPS). However, high 'anti-incumbency' may also indicate that the citizens do not feel represented by the incumbent parties (Chhibber and Shastri, 2015). Overall, there is an argument in favour of moving to an alternative electoral system in India, arguably, some form of PR. Through appropriate design, one could also guard against extreme fragmentation of party system, which a pure form of PR could lead to in the Indian situation.

Barriers to reforming electoral system

Despite the problems with the way SMPS has performed in India, electoral system reform has not been sufficiently debated or highlighted in either academic studies or policy debates. Almost all major national, regional and state parties support SMPS because they expect to gain from it either in the national or in the state assembly elections.¹⁵ For example, the BSP, a party that was 'wronged' in the 2014 national election due to SMPS (see Table 1), could hope to gain from the same system in the state assembly elections in the largest Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, as it did in 2007, winning 51% of seats on the basis of just 30% of votes.

Table 11 provides a list of seven potential barriers to electoral system reform as conceptualised by Rahat and Hazan (2011:479). Overall, as Blais and Shugart

¹⁵ Communist Party of India (CPI) is the only major party to favour proportional representation.

(2008: 198) point out, major reform to the electoral system is very unlikely and can be regarded as a mere ‘accident.’ According to Rahat (2011:524), ‘In the case of majoritarian systems (arguably, plurality systems in particular), the few large and successful parties have a strong interest in preserving a system that provides them with valuable rewards in terms of representation and influence. Even when the system does not stand by its promises...politicians do not easily turn to support its reform, possibly because they still harbor enough hope to win the grand prize.’

Table 11 Barriers to electoral system reform

	Focus	Barrier
1.	Legal	Procedural superiority of the status quo
2.	Cultural	Political tradition
3.	Sociological	Social structure
4.	Systemic	System-level rationale
5.	Seat maximizing	Vested rationale
6.	Veto players	Coalition politics
7.	Game theory	Disagreement over content

Source: Based on Rahat and Hazan (2011:479)

A similar situation prevails in India, where the interests of large and regional parties appear to be the principal explanation of the absence of the reform to the electoral system. This proposition is consistent with Colomer (2005), who argues that political party configurations dominated by a few parties tend to establish majority rule electoral systems. There have been various reports and commissions in India that have made recommendations on the subject of electoral reforms, but in most part, their focus has been more on the rules and the administrative aspects of the elections for example funding of elections, preventing criminals from fighting elections rather than the electoral system itself. As MacDonald and Moussavi (2015b: 19) point out ‘Questions of political reform in India tend to be kept within the parameters of the existing voting system.’

In a report considering changes to the electoral system and other election rules, the Law Commission of India (2015) recommended that India may retain the FPTP system in all the existing parliamentary constituencies, and then add another 25 per cent of seats, the allocation of which among recognised political parties will be according to their share in the votes polled, taking the country as a single territorial constituency for this purpose.¹⁶ Both the major national parties, the Congress and the BJP, opposed even this limited and partial move towards a PR system in the seminars held to deliberate on these draft proposals of the Law Commission. More recently, a Parliamentary Standing Committee (Scroll, 2017) has highlighted concerns that the current first-past-the-post system may not be the best in the current Indian situation given the extent of disproportionality between votes and seats, and sought the views of political parties on the subject, including on alternative systems that can be used. The committee has also asked the Election Commission to provide a comparative analysis of the first-past-the-post system followed in India and the United Kingdom.

The status quo on the subject of electoral system reform in India echoes with Lijphart's (1994, 1999) argument that a cultural/institutional approach is well suited to explain the tendency of the Anglo-American democracies toward majoritarian electoral systems and the tendency of the continental democracies toward PR electoral systems.

¹⁶ This hybrid electoral system was first proposed (but not acted upon) in a working paper 'Reform of Electoral Laws' by the Law Commission of India (1999).

Conclusions

SMPS' appeal lies in its simplicity but it only works well when two parties with national appeal share most of the vote, which is not the situation in India. This makes it much harder for governments to win an overall majority nationally, which undermines the representativeness of governments formed under SMPS. Given the increase in the number of parties in India, the elections are likely to produce more disproportional results, and therefore more unrepresentative future parliaments. The rise in support for parties other than the top two at the constituency level also raises questions about the legitimacy of MPs representing their constituents. SMPS not only penalises minor parties but also major parties in regions they are weak. Similarly, it favours major parties but also minor parties, which are strong in regions. Therefore, it can distort patterns of representation across regions, and exaggerate contrasts in the political situation across regions. Further, SMPS is poorly suited to India given the likelihood of coalition governments, where it is also possible that the party with lower vote share may either win more seats than the highest vote getting party, or form a coalition with 3rd ranked party.

Overall, one could argue that SMPS is neither representative nor is likely to lead to stable single-party governments in India – a situation that could be termed as 'worst of both the worlds'. SMPS' simplicity and low cost have often been cited as the main reasons for its continuance in India. However, as Idea (2005:14) states: 'An electoral system may be cheap and easy to administer but it may not answer the pressing

needs of a country – and when an electoral system is at odds with a country's needs the results can be disastrous.' Therefore, India should seriously consider reforming its electoral system. In respect of policy implications, a pure PR electoral system may not be feasible or desirable in the Indian context due to complexity it can introduce in the electoral process, and to avoid extreme party fragmentation. Any alternative electoral system should balance the need for adequate representation, so that citizens feel sufficiently empowered, with other requirements such as stability of India's political system.

This calls for a thorough debate and evaluation of alternative electoral systems and their variants by various stakeholders, including political parties and election experts. Although there are strong barriers to reforming the Indian electoral system, this issue is being looked at by a Parliamentary Standing Committee in the context of the limitations of the SMPS, and needs to be promoted as a prominent policy agenda item.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that any change in the electoral system in India has to be considered in the context of the broader electoral reforms, including funding of political parties to strengthen the trust in the political and electoral process, and provide a level playing field for existing parties and potential new entrants.

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